GHANA

The Archaeology of Supomu Island (Ghana) and the Atlantic Trade

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Introduction

This report details preliminary archaeological investigations conducted at Supomu Island on the Pra River, at the border of the Western and Central Regions of Ghana. Supomu means "an island" and so, henceforth, I shall refer to it only as "Supomu." The island, located some 15 kilometers upriver from the town of Shama, at the mouth of the Pra River (Figure 1), is between 50 and 150 meters wide and 600 meters long (Figure 2). The people of Supomu Dunkwa, located on the western bank of the Pra River, on the Cape Coast-Takoradi Highway, are the custodians of the island. Their traditions indicate that their ancestors moved from the island to Wawase, adjacent to Supomu on the east bank and thence to their current location in Supomu Dunkwa. The people of Supomu Dunkwa are Fante speakers and part of the larger stock of the Akan ethnolinguistic group of Ghana. During the Atlantic trade, the people of Supomu played the role of middlemen, mediating trade between the coastal merchants and Akans in the hinterlands. Gold and, later, slaves were the focus of the trade that brought these coastal societies into the fray of the emerging modern world economy. Today, Supomu is in ruins. Small-scale surface mining operations known in local parlance as "galamsey" have disturbed a substantial portion of the archaeological context of the abandoned settlement. Surface scatter and the few remaining balks from the "galamsey" operations are what remain for archaeological context recovery.

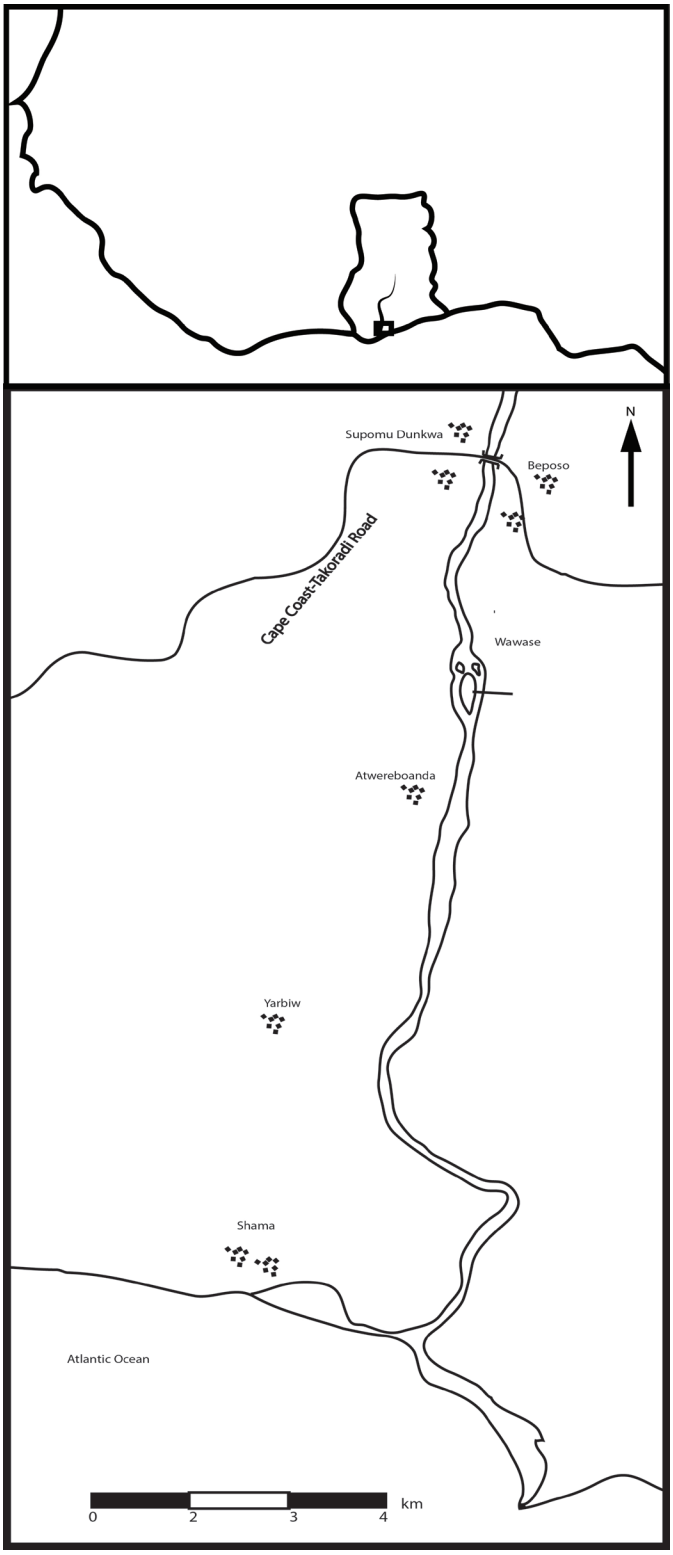

Figure 1: Map of the Lower Pra River Area (adapted from Henige 1975). Above: Ghana in West Africa showing the study area.

The research discussed here was aimed at documenting materials distribution, accessing site chronology, and identifying artifactual assemblages represented across the site. These elements are used to evaluate changes in settlement size, consumption practices, and occupational specializations, particularly potting and iron working. I illustrate the implications of these dimensions for transformations in sociopolitical organization from the beginning of the second millennium AD to the end of the nineteenth century. I aim mainly to understand how the vicissitudes of the Atlantic trade engendered social and political changes in the area.

Research at Supomu will help us understand how the Atlantic trade played out in this particular locality. The work has the potential to contribute to our understanding of how the sociopolitical landscape of the lower Pra River underwent a series of transformations due to the changes in the emerging modern world system. This work draws on, and will contribute to contemporary debates on the role of the Atlantic trade in the social and political history of the forest region of Ghana (e.g., Wilks 2005; McCaskie 2003). Emerging studies raise the question as to whether the role of Atlantic trade in the political history of the forest societies of Ghana have not been overemphasized (e.g., Chouin and DeCorse 2010). Such inherent overemphasis on the role of the Atlantic trade in the sociopolitical development of these societies emanates from the limitation of European documentary sources in the reconstruction of West African social and political history. In fact, archaeological data accumulating from the Akan forest suggest that the timing and nature of political developments in the Akan world may have been unique to the region (Shinnie 2005; Chouin and DeCorse 2010).

Background of Supomu

Today, Shama located at the mouth of the River Pra, is the seat of the paramountcy in the traditional area. Supomu-Dunkwa and Yarbiw stools flank the Shama stool as the *Nifa* (Right Wing) and *Adonten* (Center Wing) divisions of the paramountcy. Historically, the region was found in two polities, Adom and Yarbiw. Surprisingly, there is limited knowledge of these polities during the Atlantic trade. Except for the limited research by Henige (1975), there has been no particular historical research on these states. Henige traced the changing political relations

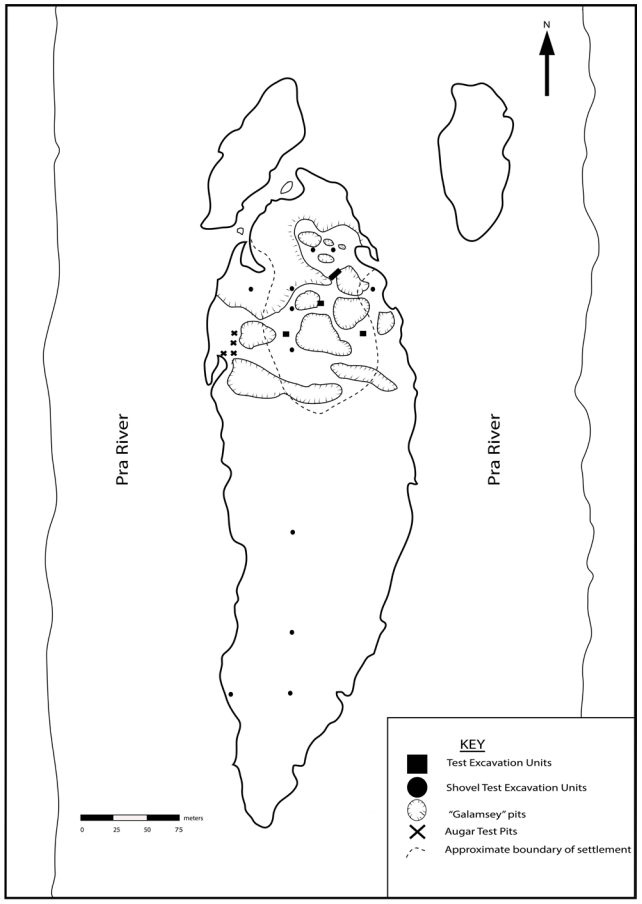

Figure 2: Site map of Supomu

between Adom, Yarbiw, and Shama, which reinforced two main dimensions of the political history of coastal Ghana: 1) during the early contact period, the main political and commercial centers were located in the hinterlands; and 2) it was the efforts of the colonial administration that brought about the shift of paramountcies from the hinterlands to the littoral (Henige 1975:39-40; also see DeCorse and Spiers 2009; Kea 1982:60-61).

According to European documentary sources, during the early contact period, Yarbiw and Adom were the two polities that dominated the immediate hinterlands of the Pra River Basin. Shama was under the suzerainty of Yarbiw during the early European contact period. Currently, Yarbiw is a small town located some 15 miles to the west of Supomu. It is not clear whether this settlement corresponds to the historic Yarbiw settlement. There are no indications of an ancestral settlement around Yarbiw's catchment area. We can rightly assume that the historic settlement was at the same location as the modern settlement.

Of these two polities, Adom, of which Supomu was part, appeared to have been the most dominant. It straddled the Pra River beyond Yarbiw to Wassa country in the north and northwest, and in the east, it was bordered by the powerful Eguafo State. However, its existence is not mentioned in early Portuguese records. This is not surprising, as it tends to reinforce the fact that prior to the colonial period Europeans had limited knowledge of the interior of West Africa (DeCorse 1996). The state is said to have enjoyed a short period of success during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries (Henige 1975:29). The Adom state faded into historical oblivion at the end of the eighteenth century (Henige 1975). This parallels Atlantic transformations to the east in the state of Eguafo, which also reached its apogee during the period of the Atlantic slave trade and then declined (DeCorse and Spiers 2009).

Archaeological Research along the Lower Pra River

This work builds upon research undertaken as part of the Central Region Project (CRP) under the auspices of Christopher DeCorse, Syracuse University (DeCorse et al. 2009). In addition, to major studies at Elmina (DeCorse 2001), Eguafo (Spiers 2007), Domenase (Carr 2001), Abrem and its environs (Chouin 2009), the project also conducted a walk survey of more than 425 square kilometers of the Central and part of Western Regions, from the Kakum River in the east to the Pra River in the west (also see Cook and Spiers 2004; DeCorse et al. 2009). This survey was undertaken to identify sites in the hinterlands that formed part of the wider sociocultural, economic, and political landscapes of the region. Supomu and adjacent areas to the east of the Pra River were surveyed in 2007. Initial surveys were conducted in 1993, 1995, 1997, and 1998 by DeCorse in the surroundings of Elmina, Eguafo, and Komenda (DeCorse 2005:44; 2001). The survey work was conducted by teams of three to four people, who traversed footpaths and trails, targeting farms and areas with good surface visibility for more intensive survey. When a site was located, the coordinates were recorded using handheld GPS units. Other surface features, artifacts present, and soil characteristics were also noted. A few diagnostic surface materials were in some cases collected. An estimated 800 sites have been recorded so far (DeCorse 2005; DeCorse et al. 2009; Cook et al. 2016). This survey work has highlighted the significance of traditional archaeological survey in discovering sites in the hinterlands, which otherwise, would have been missed because there is apparently no oral or documentary references to them. Along coastal Ghana, for instance, archaeological studies have mainly focused on historically known political and commercial centers to the detriment of the wider landscape of which these societies were part.

The current archaeological investigation at Supomu was initiated in October 2015. I have completed a map of the island and surveyed the site to locate artifacts clusters and archaeological features. I have tested several loci to identify subsurface cultural deposits. The island consists of a fairly level topography. It is covered with bamboo thickets with little undergrowth. However, the surface is covered with fall-offs from the bamboo leaves. I have collected visible diagnostic surface materials within 10-meter grids, mainly in the northern section of the island. Unfortunately, this is the part mostly disturbed by "galamsey" activities. The miners left balks in between units and I have trenched through one of these balks. This trench measures 1 X 3 meters. Surface visibility in the southern half of the island is poor due to dense vegetation cover. In this area, I placed a few random STPs along the main north-south transect. These STPs yielded no cultural materials.

The northern end of the island produced the majority of cultural material. In addition to a few European trade materials, this locus yielded ceramics ranging from well-fired, robust paste, and burnished ware, to thick bodied, rough surface ware. I suggest a date range of seventeenth through to the nineteenth centuries for these materials based on research from other parts of the coast and the immediate hinterland (e.g., DeCorse 2001:118; Kiyaga-Mulindwa 1982; Bellis 1987; Shinnie 2005). Furthermore a couple of observations need to be pointed out here regarding the nature and dating of the site. The site lacks the friable paste, thin-walled ceramics with preponderance of ledged rims typical of the pre-Atlantic contact period along the coast and hinterlands of central Ghana (compare Spiers 2007; Chouin 2009; Bellis 1972). There is also lack of any horizon without European imports corroborating the fact that the site dates to the European contact period. In fact, it is clear that by the seventeenth century the core of the settlement had been established at the northern end of the island. I make

this observation based on the local ceramic assemblage, which is briefly discussed below.

Discussion and Conclusion

Work undertaken at Supomu so far allows for some tentative conclusions to be drawn. Available data suggest that the core of the Supomu settlement dates back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. By this period the site had attained its maximum extent, covering the entire northern end of the island (see Figure 2). This is not surprising as this period coincides with the peak of the Atlantic slave trade. Further work at Wawase, northeast of Supomu, will help us understand the foundations of the Supomu settlement and its relationship to the wider social and political landscape of the region. In the mean time, it appears that Supomu was founded specifically to take advantage of the Atlantic trade. The settlement might have prospered from its strategic location as a player in the Atlantic trade between the coast and the hinterlands. The diversity in the material repertoire and correlated lateral extent of the site are indicative of the success of Supomu society. The few European materials present at the site were mainly eighteenth and nineteenth century ceramics, glass, and beads.

Preliminary observations of the local ceramics, which represent the major class of cultural materials at Supomu, indicate that there are two ceramic traditions. This observation also indicates parallels of this trend to other parts of southern Ghana. Few ceramics typical of the so-called "Akan Ware" in southern Ghana were collected from the surface and upper levels of the soil profile and represent the first type of ceramic tradition. These vessels are burnished, well-fired, smoothened, and angular in form, with limited decoration, and they are usually dated to the nineteenth century (e.g., DeCorse 2001:116-7; Bellis 1976; Kiyaga-Mulindwa 1982; Spiers 2012). These vessels have wider distribution in southern Ghana and it has been suggested that such wide distribution is an indication of Asante cultural influences in southern Ghana during the nineteenth century (DeCorse and Spiers 2009:31). The second tradition is typical of the early contact and Atlantic period (Spiers 2007). These vessels have evened to rough surfaces, everted rims but not angular, and unburnished surfaces with limited decoration. There is a preponderance of sherds from this ceramic tradition at Supomu compared to the "Akan Ware". Further analysis will help shed light on this pattern.

Archaeological evidence suggests that iron working appears to have been an important occupational component for the people of Supomu during the Atlantic trade. Surprisingly, there is no mention of iron working in the documentary sources at Supomu. Canoe working, fishing, and food production were mentioned as the main occupations of the islanders (Henige 1975:34-5). Three pieces of iron slag were recovered from the site. A fragment of tuyeres was also collected from the surface. No other associated iron working materials have been found. Other pieces of iron objects that are yet to be properly identified have been found. Subsequent analysis of the ceramics and metals tools may provide further indications on occupational specializations.

Detailed analysis of materials and survey data are yet to be completed. Further work will be carried out at Wawase. I aim to examine data from the island in relation to Wawase to assess changes in settlements organization and patterns before and during the Atlantic trade. Based on preliminary assessment, there are indications of pre-European component at Wawase, which will be key to understanding settlements histories and their implications for sociopolitical transformations from the pre-Atlantic period through to the beginning of the twentieth century.

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